Through the Ages in the Swan River Valley

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Introduction

The first European explorers to the Swan River Valley in west-central Manitoba found the region to be rich in fur-bearing animals, high in agricultural potential, well sheltered from storms, and a convenient transportation corridor between the western grasslands and the eastern forests. Many of these same factors rendered the area attractive to Canada's Native peoples over the preceding 10,000 years.

Between seventy and one hundred million years ago, a vast inland sea covered most of what is now the interior of the North American continent. Over the aeons, debris from the western mountains eroded into this sea and the weight of the water above compressed it into the shale of the Riding Mountain Formation of southwestern Manitoba. Later, this was uplifted and erosion cut away the softer eastern rock to form the Manitoba Escarpment — a long steep cliff separating the western uplands from the central lowlands. The shales are more resistant to erosion than the older, softer rock and, where the latter lay closer to the surface, drainage from the west cut deep channels into the escarpment. The Swan River Valley was initially formed in this way.

The Pleistocene Epoch, more commonly known as the "Ice Age", began between 3.5 and 1.5 million years ago. In actuality, the Pleistocene witnessed at least four major periods of glaciation. At the height of the last (or "Wisconsinan") glaciation, all of what is now the province of Manitoba lay beneath a sheet of ice which was as much as 4 kilometres thick. With the onset of a warming trend around 18,000 years ago, this ice began to melt, creating extensive lakes in its wake. The largest of these, Glacial Lake Agassiz, occupied over one-half million square kilometres of Saskatchewan, Ontario, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Manitoba, including the Swan River Valley. The level and the shape of the lake fluctuated in response to advances and retreats of the ice sheet and the opening and closing of various drainage outlets and inlets. By approximately 6000 B.C., however, only Lakes Winnipeg, Manitoba and the other of our province's "Great Lakes" remained as vestiges of their glacial predecessor.

By roughly 9500 B.C., the southwestern corner of Manitoba was free of ice. The Swan River Valley appears to have been ice-free by this time also, although it is likely that is was at least partially inundated by glacial meltwater for the next few centuries.

The Early Prehistoric Period

Meanwhile, far to the south, North America's oldest well-documented lifeway was taking shape. This culture is named "Clovis" after a town in New Mexico near which distinctive artifacts were first found. From a centre likely somewhere in the American Southwest, these highly nomadic big game hunters expanded rapidly, particularly to the north and east. The distinctive "Clovis Fluted" spearpoints have been found as far from their "homeland" as Nova Scotia. In all likelihood this far-flung dispersal was abetted by a number of factors. At this time, North America was rich in game and, as early peoples tended to rely on migratory big game species, their widespread dispersal is readily understandable.

Secondly, as Clovis peoples were among the first to populate much of the continent, they met with little or no resistance from other groups.

No more than a half dozen Clovis points have been found in Manitoba and all of them (not surprisingly) occur in southwestern Manitoba at elevations higher than that occupied by Glacial Lake Agassiz.

The oldest artifact found in the Swan River Valley is this portion of a Clovis point from near Benito. The original point was probably broken during a hunt. The spear handle, with this fragment still attached, was brought back to camp, where the remnant piece was discarded and replaced by a new point.

The discovery of a single fragmentary specimen near Benito attests to the presence of Clovis people in the district, but the general impression is that population density throughout southwestern Manitoba was low during Clovis times. Although Clovis peoples probably subsisted on a variety of plants and animals, the most favoured game species by far was the mammoth. This now-extinct form of elephant roamed widely, subsisting on plants of the extensive grasslands far to the south of the ice sheet. As southwestern Manitoba was largely covered by coniferous forests at this time, there would have been little inducement for these animals to visit the region and even less for those people who hunted them. Understandably, therefore, elephant remains are rare in Manitoba and it seems probable that those which have been found date prior to the last Ice Age — at a time before human populations first entered the continent.

By roughly 9000 B.C., mammoths were by-and-large extinct and

hunters living south of the ice sheet were turning their attention to other species — notably the now-extinct varieties of bison which, like their modern counterparts, occupied grassland environments.

Cultural developments proceeded apace and, in the south, the Clovis Culture gave way to the "Lindenmeier Culture". As was the case with its predecessor, the Lindenmeier Culture was characterized by a distinctive type of stone weapon point; archaeologists refer to it as "Folsom". The Folsom spearpoint is also characterized by a "flute" or channel on both faces, but the intricate technology and consummate skill required to execute this embellishment reached their zenith in Lindenmeier times. For many, the Folsom points are among the world's finest examples of the flint knapper's craft.

The only evidence of the Lindenmeier Culture to be found in the Swan River Valley to date is this "Midland" point, an unfluted variant of the Folsom form.

Like the earlier Clovis peoples, Lindenmeier populations do not seem to have made significant inroads into Manitoba, and probably for basically the same reasons. The lands above the level of Lake Agassiz remained under a spruce-dominated forest which failed to attract significant numbers of the grassland-adapted bison.

By the close of the Lindenmeier phase at approximately 8000 B.C., the eastern outlet of Lake Agassiz became blocked by ice and its water could no longer discharge into the Lake Superior basin. The lake rose once again to very high levels as a consequence. This was to be short-lived, however, as the warming trend which heralded the end of the Ice Age continued, causing the glacier to melt rapidly and allowing Lake Agassiz to drain into Hudson Bay.

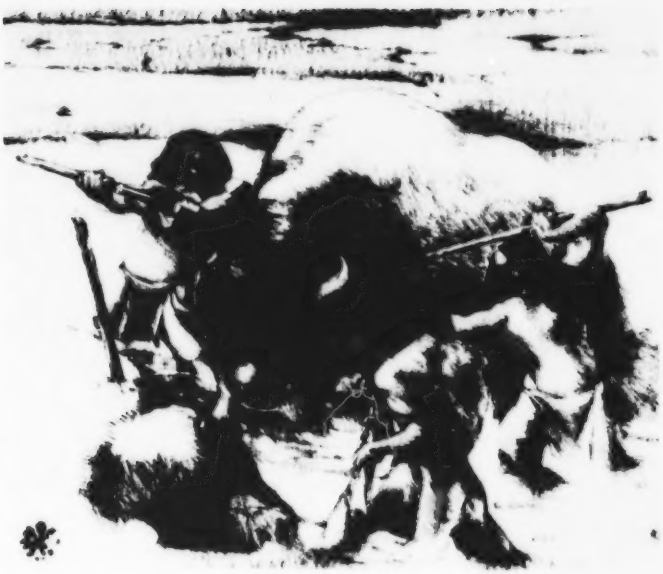
This warming trend, perhaps aided by forest fires, was also responsible for the rapid transition from spruce forest to a grassland environment over large tracts of southern Manitoba, including the Swan River Valley. Into this district came the bison which were being driven out of their original range to the south by increasing drought conditions. Here too came the hunters who depended upon the bison for food. Bison bones

from the Swan River Valley have been dated to approximately 8000 B.C. At this time, Lake Agassiz still stood at high levels and in fact the bones were recovered from a beach which was being formed at this time. The dramatic increase in the number of found artifacts dating to this so called "Plano" interval (ca. 8000 to 5000 B.C.) leads us to believe that more people were living in Manitoba than ever before, or else they stayed around longer than had previous occupants, or both.

The leather industry extends back into Early Prehistoric time in the Swan River Valley.

The Middle Prehistoric Period

The warming, drying trend which wasted the glaciers reached its maximum around 5000 B.C. At this time, the High Plains Region of central North America experienced long, warm, dry summers and a higher rate of moisture evaporation. This in turn increased soil drought and a lowering of the water table. Less snow fell in the winter months, so that there was less



Bison hunting — a long-standing tradition in the prehistoric Swan River Valley.

of it available for winter plant insulation. This in turn meant that spring runoff would have been diminished and hence less water was available for plants at this critical time of year. Thaw-freeze situations throughout the winter produced snow encrustation and feeding problems for the animal populations. All of these conditions were created by greater dominance of the Pacific airmass that gave rise to an increase in the strength and frequency of prevailing westerlies. The grasslands continued to expand to the north and east at the expense of the forests.

All of these factors conspired to alter the migratory patterns of the bison and, as a consequence, the food-getting practices of bison hunters. The people and their prey spent increasingly lengthy portions of the year in well-watered and sheltered locations. The Swan River Valley constituted precisely such a retreat from the drought of the High Plains.

Meanwhile, in the forests of eastern North America, changes were taking place which would soon have implications for southern Manitoba. People were forsaking their earlier nomadic, big game hunting ways and were more heavily exploiting a diversity of plants, land and riverine animals, and birds. This broad economic base allowed them a more secure existence than did reliance upon a single and often unpredictable resource, and their populations grew accordingly. These peoples are identifiable in the archaeological record as the makers of the side-notched dart points called "Logan Creek", after a site in Nebraska. While in their

forest-edge refuges, late Plano people encountered these other cultures and adjusted their lifeways to more closely approximate those of the easterners. Armed with this new subsistence strategy, they and their descendants spread along the river valleys as far west as the Rocky Mountains and to the forest edge in the north. The arrival of these Logan Creek peoples in the Swan River Valley likely dates to approximately 4000 B.C. The fact that artifacts of this tradition have been recovered from sites which are now beneath bogs underscores the dryness of the conditions which prevailed at that time.

A stone spear or dart point of the Logan Creek style from a site north of Big Woody.

The drought conditions began to ease by 3500 B.C., and by 3000 B.C. more normal conditions had been re-established. Over the next 3000 years, the open grasslands were more heavily exploited and communal methods of bison hunting came to be used frequently. Principal among these were the bison "jump" and pound, whereby the animals would be stampeded over a cliff or into an enclosure constructed to entrap them. In either event, a goodly supply of meat for the winter was assured. One of the more intriguing cultures to find its way into the Swan River Valley during the latter half of the Middle Prehistoric Period is the one we refer to as "Old Copper". As early as 3000 B.C., and possibly even before that, Native people in the Great Lakes region began manufacturing artifacts out of beaten copper. On several occasions, bands of these people "immigrated" into Manitoba and made their way along the rivers, lakeshores and the old beach ridges of extinct Lake Agassiz to the Swan River Valley.

A bison kill scene of the Middle Prehistoric Period.

The Late Prehistoric Period

The appearance around the time of Christ of aboriginal ceramics in the eastern and northern forests of Manitoba marks the beginning of the Late Prehistoric Period. The forest-adapted peoples of the Canadian Shield pursued a way of life which was essentially a continuation and intensification of that of their forebears. These ancestors of such groups as the Cree and Ojibwa relied on a diversity of plants (including wild rice), fish and migratory wildfowl to supplement the hunting of moose and elk. A major hallmark of forest culture, the birch bark canoe, was perhaps developed at this time, as was the bow and arrow. Archaeological evidence of Late Prehistoric forest culture has been found in the Swan River Valley which, throughout most of Late Prehistoric time, was probably part of the Aspen Parkland of Western Canada. The rich environment of the valley and its surroundings would have provided its occupants with several options throughout the yearly cycle. In spring, families or bands could have proceeded to the mouths of the streams flowing into Lake Winnipegosis to the east, there to take advantage of the rich fisheries during the spawning runs. Alternatively, they could have obtained fish at selected spots on the Swan and Woody Rivers. They could have moved into the Duck and Porcupine Mountains for the summer to hunt moose and elk, or else they could have proceeded out onto the grasslands to the southwest in pursuit of the bison. With the coming of late fall, further opportunities presented themselves to the people of the district. The bison moved into the sheltered valley to avoid the icy winds of the exposed

Prehistoric Cree pottery, found over much of Manitoba's north, was made and used in the Swan River Valley.

The discovery of prehistoric harpoons in the Swan River Valley suggests that fishing was practiced locally in Late Prehistoric times.

A village scene of the Late Prehistoric Period.

plains, while moose and elk descended into the low-lying areas from the adjacent uplands. Such concentrations of big game were surely an attraction to the region's human inhabitants, who no doubt converged upon the valley from all directions to share in its abundant food resources. In light of these kinds of considerations, one has little difficulty understanding why the prehistoric record of the valley is so rich and varied.

The Historic Period

This ancient way of life was soon to be disrupted. The 1700s witnessed the exploration of the valley, and by the end of the century, the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies were in fierce, often bitter competition for control of the fur trade. The Swan River Valley was one of the major arenas within which this struggle was played. Due to their familiarity with the area and their skill as hunters and trappers, local Natives were engaged to supply the posts with furs and provisions. While many of these activities were in one sense traditional, they were dictated by the European market economy rather than subsistence needs. Certainly the magnitude of these operations and the resource depletion they brought about contributed as much to the loss of the traditional way of life as did the introduction of the new technology.

The appearance of Euro-Canadian trade goods in archeological sites and the earliest written documentation of the area mark the end of prehistory. Although history thus defined stretches back nearly three hundred years, this represents less than two per cent of the human history of the Swan River Valley.

During the Late Prehistoric Period and on into Historic times, both the valley itself and the adjacent uplands provided excellent "moose pasture." According to explorers' journals and recent studies, moose migrated between the uplands and lowlands according to the seasons; but it is possible that both habitats had resident moose populations the year round.

With the advent of the Historic Period came, among many other things, increased mobility, provided by the horse, and iron tools and weapons.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Several papers have been published by Eugene Gryba on the archaeology of the Swan River Valley: *The Hill Sites: Two Surface Sites in the Swan Valley, Manitoba*, Napao, 1976, Vol. 6, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 21-40; *The Prehistoric Occupation of the Lower Trout Creek-Hubble Creek Drainage Area in the Swan Valley of Manitoba*, Napao, 1977, Vol. 7, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 8-28; and *An Introduction to the Prehistoric Human Occupation of the Southeastern Section of the Swan Valley, Manitoba*, Napao, 1981, Vol. 11, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 17-40. For a broad perspective of Manitoba's prehistoric past, see *Introducing Manitoba Prehistory*, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, Popular Series No. 4, 1983.

The Swan River Valley

For the past 10,000 years, the Swan River Valley has been a homeland for Native peoples. Among the earliest groups into the valley were Indians who hunted now-extinct species of bison that grazed around the shores of Glacial Lake Agassiz. Later groups, perhaps spurred by droughts across the High Plains to the south and west, sought refuge in the valley's relatively stable environment which included an abundance of game, fish and plant resources. During the past 2,000 years, the district was shared by both the western bison hunters and the forest peoples of the Manitoba Lowlands. The development of the European fur trade in the 1700s brought further cultural contact and change. Agricultural settlement and the founding of present day communities began in the late 19th century.